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ABSTRACT

This study examined loneliness, social support, and help-seeking behavior in children, ages 9 to 13. Participating were 330 fourth to sixth graders from middle and low income families from the Montreal, Canada region, who completed two questionnaires measuring feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction and help-seeking. Independent variables were sex, school performance, and socioeconomic status (SES). The results indicated that children with lower school performance were significantly more lonely than children with higher school performance, and more particularly expressed feelings of rejection and isolation. Sex and SES had no effect on the loneliness score. However, the presence of social support and help-seeking behavior were influenced particularly by sex and school performance, and to a lesser degree, by SES. Girls sought help more than boys for all the problem situations encountered and sought more often the emotional and information type of support during which they appealed to the nuclear family and to friends. Low-performing children on the whole sought as much help as high-performing children, except for two emotional situations related to confiding a problem in someone and when the child was sad. Sex, school performance, and SES also determined the relative importance of different sources of support, nuclear family, extended family, friends, and animals. The nuclear family was sought out first for informational support, before emotional support. (Contains 25 references.) (KDFB)

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Loneliness and support in children aged 9 to 13

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Abstract

The present study examines loneliness, social support and help-seeking behavior in children aged nine to thirteen. A sample of 330, fourth to sixth grade children (179 boys and 151 girls) completed questionnaires designed to measure different aspects of child socialization. Three independant variables were examined: sex, school performance and SES. The data were analysed using ANOVA and Pearson correlations.

Low performing children were found to be significantly more lonely than *Performing* children. Sex and SES had no effect on loneliness scores. However, the presence of social support and help-seeking behavior were influenced particularly by sex and school performance, and to a lesser degree, by SES. These variables also determined the relative importance of different sources of support, nuclear family, extended family, friends and animals. The results raise questions as to the particular role played by these sources of support and their relationship to loneliness.

Introduction

Over the past few years, researchers have been interested by the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction experienced by children in the United States (Asher and Wheeler, 1985; Cassidy and Asher, 1992; Hymel and Franke, 1985; Luftig, 1987), in Australia (Renshaw and Brown, 1993), and in Belgium (Marcoen and Brumagne, 1985; Marcoen, Goossens and Caes, 1987; Marcoen and Goossens, 1993). Results indicate that a relatively high number of children (from 17.6% to 41.5%) have feelings of loneliness resulting from the relationships with others (Asher, Hymel & Renshaw, 1984, Asher and Wheeler, 1985, Luftig, 1987). Such feelings might be related to the fact of being popular or not (sociometric measure): children who are unpopular with their classmates report more frequently the feeling of loneliness and dissatisfaction in their social relationships than children who are popular (Asher et al., 1984), and those who are rejected complain much more than those who feel merely neglected (Asher and Wheeler, 1985; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel and Williams, 1990). Feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction also seem to be particularly prevalent in children with low academic achievement. In a study of 876 children from kindergarten to fourth grade, Quay (1992) notes that the poor readers experience loneliness the most. These pupils feel humiliated in class because of their poor performance and at the same time they do not have the

status that success brings in the peers' and the teacher's eyes. They are thus vulnerable to feelings of rejection and to loneliness.

While feelings of loneliness are related to interrelations with others and the social integration of the child, the seeking of help is also involved when the situation demands it. A child's perception of the support he or she can receive from peers has a place in his or her active seeking of help from such peers (Heller and Swindle, 1983). The child who expects little support, for example because he cannot depend upon friends, seeks less such support (Berndt and Perry, 1986). Fearing negative reactions on the part of others can prevent help-seeking despite an intensely felt need. In a study dealing with help-seeking for school assignements in elementary school children, Newman and Goldin (1990) have noted that low academic achievement is associated with a perception of the need for help. However, there is great reluctance in seeking it. If there is apprehension that the effort to sollicit help will end in failure, all attempts will be inhibited because of the disastrous impact on self-esteem and competence. Thus, academic success and help-seeking are related "in a reciprocal and dynamic manner" (Newman and Goldin, 1990). Yet, for Bowlby (1973) an essential element of a person's good health is his or her ability to call upon others if the situation warrants it, and knowing which person is the most apt to provide such help.

Two main sources of support have been identified for a child: family support and extra-family support from peers and adults (Bogat, Caldwell, Rogosch and Kriegler, 1985, Cauce, Hannan and Sargeant, 1992, Garmezy, 1983, Werner and Smith, 1982). Family support is important in various areas and contributes to neutralize the negative impact of some stressful events, for example, on school performance. Naturally, the support supplied by the school aimes to counter the negative effects of stress on academic performance (Cauce and Srebnik, 1989). In addition to cooperation, peers are also able to provide emotional support, in particular for children aged 9 years and older (Berndt and Perry, 1986). Bryant (1985) mentions domestic pets as a third source of support. In her study of 168 children aged between 7 and 10 years old, Bryant notes that in fact, an animal can be a confident, always available companion, who never criticizes and provides the opportunity for play as well as for assuming responsabilities. To what extent are such supports available?

Several variables can influence the results, such as academic performance, but also sex and socioeconomic status. For example, according to Northman (1978), girls tend to

have more help than boys. It must be noted that depending on the methodology employed, all studies are not concordant, this is why it is of interest to study in the same sample of subjects, feelings of loneliness, help-seeking behavior and those supports that the child perceives as being available.

Purpose of the study

To carry out an analysis of the feelings of loneliness, the help-seeking behavior and the social supports of a sample of 9 to 13 year-old children, taking into account three variables: academic performance, sex and socioeconomic status.

Method

Subjects

Three hundred and thirty children (179 boys and 151 girls) at the elementary school level and coming from middle income (157) and low income (173) families of the Montreal region, participated in this study.

One hundred and ninety children where high-performers (school report card results) while 140 where low-performers. The children were aged 9 to 13 years, (mean age = 11 years 2 months, s.d. = 1 year 2 months). Seventy two percent of the children were living with their two parents.

Instruments

Two questionnaires[1] were used dealing with 1) the feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction, 2) help-seeking.

Questionnaire on loneliness and social dissatisfaction

This questionnaire contains 29 items. Sixteen items were taken from the Asher test (Asher, Hymel and Renshaw (1984), Asher and Wheeler (1985)) and deal with feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction felt by the child in school (for example, "I

[1] Questionnaires will be sent upon request.

feel alone at school" or "it is hard for me to make friends at school"). Five items taken from the Marcoen test (Marcoen and Brumagne (1985), Marcoen, Goosens and Caes (1987)) concern the family context ("my parents do not listen to me when I have something to say"). In addition, peer relations in the neighbourhood were probed by four items ("I have many friends near home"), and finally four items directly addressed the positive and negative experience of loneliness ("I like to be alone" or "when I am alone, I would like to have other people around"). Children expressed to what extent the statement corresponds to their experience by checking one of the choices: never true, sometimes true, often true, always true (scored 1 - 4). The total scores of the test can vary from 29 to 116, the latter signalizing strongest feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

The questionnaire was validated in pre-experimentation of 97 subjects. Factor analysis (qartimax rotation) extracted two factors, one measuring the feelings of loneliness arising from difficulties in social relationships (14 items) and the other measuring the feeling of isolation through rejection (15 items). The items relating to parents and to friends in the neighbourhood were equally divided between the two scales. Alpha coefficient was .84 for the entire questionnaire.

Help-seeking questionnaire

This instrument is based on the work of Berndt and Perry (1986), Newman and Golding (1990), Wintre et al., (1988). It covers ten problem situations, identified as such by the children in the pre-experimentation stage, which are described in action terms. Three situations deal with peer relations, (e.g. "I need help when the others make fun of me"), three address relationships with adults ("I need help when I have conflicts with adults"), three are related to emotions and feelings of the child ("I need help when I am too sad") and one situation relates to academic difficulties ("I need help when I have problems in class"). The child identifies the situations which elicit help-seeking. The source of help is indicated by checking list items describing the nuclear family, the extended family, unrelated adults, peers and animals. Finally the kind of help desired is specified ("to be listened to" or "to be given advice"). Help can be classified into emotional support ("someone who is going to listen to me"), instrumental assistance ("someone who will help to do the work"), informational advice ("someone who will explain things to me") and companionship ("someone who will spend time with me"),

(see Reid, Landesman, Treder and Jaccard; 1989). The internal consistency of this questionnaire was .72.

Procedure

The children were recruited with the cooperation of four school boards. The children who met the selection criteria and whose parents consented were asked to fill out the questionnaires in groups of 5 or 6. The questionnaires were administered by graduate students.

Results

As can be seen in table 1, significant differences have been noted in regards to feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction related to the academic performance variable. The low-performing children expressed significantly more feelings of loneliness than the high-performers, more particularly feelings of rejection and isolation (see isolation-rejection subscale). A significant difference was also observed on the subscale "social relationship problems". The two subscales, not surprisingly, are correlated ($r(328)=.52$, $p<.001$). Neither sex nor socioeconomic level differentiated the feelings of loneliness.

In regards to help-seeking (table 2), sex and academic status have influenced the results. Girls, significantly more than boys have sought help for all of the problem situations encountered (see global scale for help-seeking). They have also sought significantly more the emotional type and the informational type of support in which case they predominantly appealed to the nuclear family ($p<.01$) and friends ($p<.05$).

Low-performing children, on the whole, have sought as much help as high-performing children. But there were two situations related to emotions, where more high-performing children sought help than low-performing children. That is "when I need to confide my problem" (60% vs 47%, $Z=2,32$, $p<.01$) and "when I am too sad" (72% vs 49%, $Z=4,12$, $p<.001$). The types of support were not much different for the two groups of children. However, performance environment interactions have indicated that low-performing children from low income families have sought less help of the informational type ($F(1,322)= 7.03$; $p<.01$) and of the instrumental type ($F(1,322)= 13,57$; $p<.01$). This instrumental type of support was the only one upon which the

socioeconomic status had a direct influence ($p<.05$). Performing children have sought significantly more the support of friends ($p<.01$) and animals ($p<.05$). In the two particular situations, mentioned above, relating to emotions, performing children have sought more the support from the nuclear family ($F(1,322)= 15,64$, $p<.01$), whereas low-performers have called upon the extended family ($p<.01$).

As can be seen in Table 3, the correlations between types of support and their sources underline the importance of friends for emotional support and for informational support in that order, while the nuclear family is first sought for informational support, before emotional support. Informational and emotional support are correlated ($r(328)= .41$, $p<.001$) indicating that listening or giving advice implies attention payed to the child. Surprising are the correlations between the emotional/companionship support and animals, all the more so as these correlations appear to be higher than those relating to the extended family or unrelated adults.

Discussion

Significant differences have been noted in regards to feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction related to the academic performance variable. These results are of the same nature as those noted by Quay (1992). Low-performing children expressed significantly more feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation than performing children. These feelings are indicative of their difficulties in social relations. On the other hand, neither sex nor socioeconomic status have influenced the results, which is different to that which was noted in regards to help-seeking. Girls are more likely to seek help than boys. They elicit emotional help more often (to be listened to, protected, reassured) and also seek information more often (for explanations and advice). Generally speaking, girls are significantly better in marshalling help than boys by addressing family and friends, as already suggested by Northman (1978).

Low-performing children on the whole sought as much help as performing children, except in two situations related to emotions. On the other hand, low-performing children from low income families have sought less help of the informational type (obtain explanations) and of the instrumental type (have someone who concretely helps to do the work), thus they are at a disadvantage when it comes to problem solving.

In order to seek help it is necessary to be assured that there is, in fact, support forthcoming (Berndt and Perry, 1986; Heller and Swindle, 1983; Newman and Goldin, 1990). Support and help-seeking are dynamically interrelated, and as sources of support, the peers and friends of the children count as much as adults (Bogat et al., 1985; Cauce et al., 1992; Garmezy, 1983; Werner and Smith, 1982; Wolchik et al., 1989). In our study significant correlations point to the fact that emotional and informational support falls predominantly to close friends and the nuclear family. Companionship and emotional support can also come from animals, confirming the findings of Bryant (1985).

High-performing children have sought significantly more the support of friends and animals while low-performers have called upon the extended family (uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.). But the weak correlations (even if they are significant) between the forms of support and the members of the extended family suggest that this extended family does not play a very important role in the supports provided to the child. This is contrary to the case of the role played by the nuclear family and friends. That low-performing children suffer the most from feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction can be directly related to the fact of not being able to call as much upon friends for support, which is different from the high-performing children. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand why the low-performing children cannot obtain as much support from animals as the high-performers. One cannot invoke the socioeconomic environment of the subjects to explain this since both high-performers and low-performers came from middle and low income families. Don't they know how to "use" an animal's resources?

Thus, a relation appears between low academic performance, feelings of loneliness, less effective help-seeking and less available supports. In view of the importance of the different sources of support for an adequate adaptation of the child (Bogat et al., 1985, Cauce et al., 1992), the children who are more deprived of these can present different problems. Academic failure has social implications, and difficulties in the present can squander the future by preventing an adequate integration of the youngster in his or her environment. However, other factors are certainly involved which further studies will have to identify.

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Table 1

Feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction of elementary school children: means and results of the analysis of variance[1]

	Boys (N=179)	Girls (N=151)		High-performers (N=190)	Low-performers (N=140)		Middle SES (N=157)	Low SES (N=173)	
	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$
Global scale	1.86 (0.36)[2]	1.83 (0.40)	0.03	1.79 (0.35)	1.93 (0.41)	11.60**	1.84 (0.34)	1.85 (0.41)	0.00
Isolation-rejection subscale	1.60 (0.42)	1.59 (0.48)	0.23	1.51 (0.40)	1.71 (0.50)	14.12**	1.57 (0.42)	1.62 (0.49)	0.66
Social relationship problems subscale	2.14 (0.42)	2.10 (0.42)	0.05	2.08 (0.37)	2.17 (0.47)	4.25*	2.13 (0.40)	2.11 (0.43)	1.04

1. Anova (sex x performance x ses)
2. Standard deviations

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 2

Help seeking by elementary school children: means and results of the analysis of variance[1]

	Boys (N=179)	Girls (N=151)		High-performers (N=190)	Low-performers (N=140)		Middle SES (N=157)	Low SES (N=173)	
	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$	Mean	Mean	$F_{(1,322)}$
Global scale for help-seeking	0.46 (0.24)[2]	0.57 (0.22)	16.77**	0.53 (0.22)	0.49 (0.25)	0.95	0.52 (0.16)	0.51 (0.23)	0.47
Emotional support	2.66 (2.42)	4.10 (3.22)	16.68**	3.65 (2.03)	2.87 (2.45)	3.23	3.53 2.95)	3.13 (2.55)	1.23
Instrumental support	0.56 (0.91)	0.73 (0.99)	2.21	0.62 (0.89)	0.67 (1.02)	1.22	0.71 (1.03)	0.58 (0.83)	4.14*
Informational support	1.89 (1.74)	2.51 (1.88)	7.59**	2.38 (1.85)	1.89 (1.77)	3.36	2.24 (1.86)	2.12 (1.70)	0.42
Companionship	0.85 (1.17)	0.85 (1.08)	0.14	0.95 (1.10)	0.73 (1.14)	2.66	0.86 (1.10)	0.85 (1.17)	0.01
From friends	0.76 (1.11)	1.26 (1.51)	6.55*	1.27 (1.48)	0.61 (0.99)	17.72**	1.11 (1.21)	0.88 (1.11)	1.51
Nuclear family	2.53 (2.32)	3.50 (2.58)	10.26**	3.27 2.48)	2.56 (2.43)	3.59	3.19 (2.63)	2.77 (2.21)	3.42
Extended family	0.55 (1.07)	0.67 (1.15)	1.94	0.43 (0.83)	0.85 (1.37)	12.14**	0.53 (0.96)	0.68 (1.18)	0.60
Unrelated adults	1.03 (1.07)	1.11 (1.05)	0.39	1.08 (1.03)	1.04 (1.09)	0.29	1.01 (1.03)	1.12 (1.05)	1.32
Animals	0.39 (0.97)	0.56 (0.99)	1.42	0.57 (1.14)	0.32 (0.68)	3.82*	0.57 (1.06)	0.37 (0.74)	2.36

1. Anova (sex x performance x ses)
2. Standard deviations

* $p<.05$

** $p<.01$

Table 3

Correlations[1] between certain types of support and the sources of such support

	Friends	Nuclear family	Extended family	Unrelated adults	Animals
Emotional support	.51**	.35**	.23**	.23**	.28**
Informational support	.33**	.46**	.09	.16*	.13*
Companionship	.19*	.21**	.12*	.00	.24**
Instrumental support	.09	.23**	.02	.22**	.09

1. Pearson correlations
N = 330
* p.<.05
** p.<.01